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ABSTRACT

Both language students and language teachers can be troubled by new words, expressions, or usage in Chinese. A new use of an old word or expression is particularly difficult for a more advanced or experienced speaker, less so for a beginner. The growing popularity of abbreviations is another kind of change creating problems. Two kinds of abbreviations are commonly found: the use of fewer characters (often just two) representing a longer term, and the number-character-number-character form. These may require substantial research before they are understood. A third problem arises from the civilian use of military terms, such as "troop training" for a form of vocational training. Shifts in parts of speech, such as an adjective used as a verb, create new grammatical usages and require an alertness to structure. Euphemisms created to suit new social and political preferences can be misleading. Finally, entirely new expressions are not uncommon and may also not be found in a dictionary. It is important not to take some of the new forms literally without more knowledge of possible hidden meanings, and the help of a native speaker is valuable in understanding them. (MSE)

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Problems Caused by the Neologisms in Teaching Chinese

Eugene Ching

(A paper read at the CLTA/ACTFL annual conference held in San Francisco, November 25-26, 1983.)

In language teaching we normally consider three major areas, namely, phonological, syntactical, and lexical. For a beginning student with a limited number of lexical items, he may be able to master the phonological and syntactical features of a language in not too long a period. To master the lexicon, however, could be a life-time proposition. Being the most fluid of the three, vocabulary items come and go all the time. The most up-to-date dictionaries cannot possibly cover all the new coinages. Language students as well as language teachers are constantly troubled by words and expressions run into for the first time. Of these items, some are new only to the reader but by no means being a new creation. Those which are really new coinages may be so new that even the most up-to-date dictionary does not list them. In this paper I am going to discuss the kinds of problems caused by the latter kind known as neologisms.

First, let us see what are neologisms? A neologism, according to the Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, is "a new word, usage, or expression." From this definition we can see that a neologism can be a new usage of an old word or expression. This new usage of an old word or expression will give us the first problem, which, in my opinion, is the most misleading. in 1969 I was window shopping on a Hong Kong street. In front of the New China Bookstore, I was attracted by a poster with this caption: Máo Zhǔxí hé tāde àirén Yáng Kāihuì. I read it as Chairman Mao with his lover Yang Kaihui without knowing that the meaning of àirén had been changed from lover to spouse. Another example happened to me almost ten years later. When I went back to China after an absence of more than thirty years, I heard people use the word jǐnzhāng, "tense, nervous," in

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phrases like "lǚguǎn jǐnzhāng," "huǒchē jǐnzhāng," etc. I could not but wonder how could a hotel or train become nervous or tense? In my mind then, only people could be nervous and only work could make people tense. It didn't take long for me to find out that jǐnzhāng had taken up an additional meaning, the shortage of something. When the ticket for a train ride is hard to come by, your travel agent would say, "Xiànzai huǒchē hěn jǐnzhāng (Now it is difficult to get a seat on the train)." When all the hotel rooms are booked up, your guide may say this, "Xiànzài lǚguǎn jǐnzhāng, bùróngyi dìngdào fángjiān (Now hotel rooms are in short supply. It is not easy to get a room)." This kind of problem is probably even more serious for people who have already learned too much. For the beginners, it will be just another new word to be learned.

The second problem is caused by the popularity with abbreviations. There are at least two kinds of abbreviations I can think of. One will be the use of fewer characters, very often just two, to represent a longer term. For example, wài bàn for wàishì bàngōngshì (foreign affairs office), zhōng zhí for Zhōngyāng zhíshǔ jīguān (agencies under the direct jurisdiction of the central government), etc. are of this kind. The other abbreviation will be the number-character-number-character type. A typical example would be sān-zhuàn-yī-xiǎng (three-turning-one-sounding), which means three things that turn and one thing that makes noice. In order to know what they are, we have to go further: The three turning things are bicycle, sewing machine, and a watch; while the one thing that makes noice is a radio. Do we understand it

now? Not quite. We have to know in what context it is used. For a while, it represented the four desirable items any one in China would like to have, particularly when one is in a position to bargain for those items such as the dowry requests from a would-be bride. Another good example lies in the recent slogan, wǔ-jiǎng-sì-měi-sān-rèài (five particulars-four beauties-three enthusiastical loves). This one needs even more explanation than the one just cited. Let me list these items in the following:

Wǔ jiǎng	The five particulars
jiǎng wénmíng	particular about being cultured
jiǎng dàodé	particular about being moral
jiǎng wèishēng	particular about hygiene
jiǎng zhǐxù	particular about social order
jiǎng lǐmào	particular about improved manners
Sì měi	The four beauties
xīnlíng měi	beautiful mind
yǔyán měi	beautiful language
xíngwéi měi	beautiful conduct
huánjìng měi	beautiful environment
Sān rèài	The three enthusiastical loves
rèài zǔguó	enthusiastical love for one's fatherland
rèài rénmín	enthusiastical love for the people
rèài shèhuìzhǔyì	enthusiastical love for socialism

From the above, we can see that five items begin with the character jiǎng (particular), four items end with měi (beauty or beautiful), and three items begin with rèài (enthusiastical love). When we run across an expression like wǔ jiǎng sìměi sān rèài, which is much much condensed from something which is much much longer, a great

deal of research has to be done before a reasonable understanding can be reached.

The third problem caused by the neologisms lies in the civilian uses of military terms. In a barber shop in Beijing I saw a bulletin, in which liànbīng (troop-training) was used for in-service training of newly recruited barbers. On the scafolding of a construction project in Xi'an, huìzhàn, a military term for a decisive battle, was used to encourage the electricians, the carpenters, the masons, etc. to go about their jobs as if they were in a battle. When we read something like that, we may think the workers are bellicose. Nothing could be further from the truth.

When we read materials from the PRC, we also find new grammatical usages. The shift of the parts of speech is quite common. An adjective may be used as a verb: duānzhèng sīxiǎng (to rectify one's thinking). An adverb may be formed by affixing a de to the end of a noun: shèhuìzhǔyìde jiànshè xīn Zhōngguó (to build up new China socialistically), Yīngxióngde dǐkàng Měi dì (to resist the American imperialist heroically), tiāncáide lǐngdǎo Zhōngguo gémìng (to lead the Chinese revolution talendedly). All these noun + de forms are normally used as possessives: shèhuìzhǔyìde mùbiāo (the goals of socialism), yīngxióngde qìgài (lofty quality of a hero), tiāncáide qìzhí (the makings of a talent). Interestingly, some of the possessives have been used as adjectives in a quite different sense. One example was found in Chongqing. Before we were about to enter the city, I saw the sign saying Jiànshè shēngchǎnde Chóngqìng (to build a productive Chongqing). Normally we would expect a rather different usage of shēngchǎnde, which is

used to say two things: X made by Y or Y which makes X. To represent it with words, we will have the following:

Chóngqìng shēngchǎnde zìxíngchē

(bicycles made in Chongqing)

Shēngchǎn zìxíngchēde Chóngqìng

(Chongqing that produces bicycles)

There are different ways to form Chinese compounds, and each kind has its own peculiar properties. To make one kind behave like another is another interesting phenomenon I have found in China. Wánchéng (to complete), a coordinate compound, was used as a verb-complement compound: wándechéng wánbuchéng, a V-C way to show potentiality, should have been wánchéngdeliǎo wánchéng-buliǎo, using wánchéng as the V part and liǎo as the C part. Duìxiàng, normally a noun, was heard to be used as a Verb-object construction in duile xiang le (met one's girl friend or boy friend).

I found one case in which a noun was used as a verb. Zuòyòng (effect) is a noun, which is normally used with the verb qǐ (to start). In Qǐ dàitóu zuòyòng (to play the role of a leader), zuòyòng is the object of qǐ and modified by dàitóu. In the sentence, Wàijiède shìwù zuòyòngyú rénménde gǎnjué qìguān, zài rénménde tóu-nǎoli xíngchéng yìnxiàng (External things act on our sense organs and give rise to impressions in our brains), zuòyòng is used as a verb, which is rare.

One may argue that what have been discussed above happen with older expressions too. True. But we must not let that fact keep us from being alert to this kind of problem with the new terms. In other words, we must not assume too much. For passive and active

learning of the language, we must be aware of these abnormalities.

The abnormalities mentioned above lead us to another problem. We should not take some of the neologisms literally. They are very often figures of speech or play on words. Without the knowledge of their hidden meanings, we are at a loss of what they are talking about. For example, a college graduate would declare patriotically that he or she would obey the orders of the government and would be willing to be assigned to tiān nán hǎi běi, literally, the south of heaven and the north of the sea or anywhere. In reality, tiān stands for Tianjin, nán for nanjing, hǎi for Shanghai, and běi for Beijing, the four most desirable locations for any assignments. Qìguǎnyán, tracheitis, has been used to describe a hen-pecked husband because it sounds almost like qī guǎn yán, wife disciplines strictly (The only difference lies in the tone of the first syllable). When somebody ridiculed his friend being one who suffered from tracheitis, he might be perfectly healthy, but hen-pecked.

Figures of speech contribute many expressions to this group. Chuān xiǎo xié, for example, means literally "to wear small shoes." When used, it is most likely to mean "to make things difficult for some one." Dài màozi is another example. Literally, it means "to wear a cap," but in reality, it means "to classify a person usually as one of the undesirable elements." Items that are used not for their literal meanings are too many to be listed here. The problem caused by this group would be proportional with its frequency of usage and the easiness in assuming its apparent meanings.

The next problem to be discussed is also related to the hidden meanings of some of the neologisms with social implications. which may be even more subtle, but also important for good understanding. Since the beginning of the PRC, social status of the people has undergone tremendous changes. Euphemisms are created to suit the new preferences. A pedicurist (xiūjiǎode) has become a foot doctor (jiǎo dàifu), whose medical training is far from adequate to qualify for a podiatrist. A paramedic became a chìjiǎo yīshēng (barefoot doctor). When I received my frist letter from my brother, he told me that three of his four sons were workers. I could sense his pride, genuine or forced, in telling me that. In old China, it would have been considered a failure of the family.

Of the ten conditions for choosing a mate, No. seven stipulates qīshí yuán, seventy yuan, roughly equivalent to thirty-five U.S. dollars. In China, where the average wage is about 25 dollars, 35 dollars is pretty good pay. Hǎiwài guānxi (overseas connections) was once a crime. Those who had overseas relatives were persecuted. Now, it has become desirable among [illegible] another set of qualifications circulated in Shanghai. For those who are interested, the ten conditions are 1. yítào fángzi (a suite of rooms), 2. èrlǎo shuāng wáng (both parents deceased), 3. sān zhuàn yì xiǎng (the three turning things and the one noisy thing), 4. sìjì yīshang (four-season clothing), 5. wǔguān duānzhèng (good looks), 6. liùqīn búrèn (no involvement with all relatives), 7. qīshí yuán (70 yuan), 8. bāmiàn línglóng (smooth and slick), 9. jiǔ bùzhān (don't drink), 10. shífēn tīnghuà (100% obedient). The set of qualifications circulated in Shanghai is represented by the three armed forces: hǎi lù kōng. Hǎi (the navy)

represents hǎiwài guānxi (overseas connections), lù (army), because of its dialectal pronunciation, represnets luòshí zhèngcè (referring to the implementation of the government policy to right the wrong by giving back pay), and kōng (the air force) represents kōng fángzi (empty room). We can see clearly problems caused by this group is no longer just linguistic. Many other factors are involved.

Last but not the least, we come to the neologisms which are truly newly created things,or in the Chinese expression xīnshēng shìwù. No matter how new they may be, they still fall into the syntactical patterns of the Chinese language. They may be called new wine in an old bottle type, jiù píng xīn jiǔ.

In the following a few examples are given under each category of the Chinese compounds:

Verb-object (V-O)

biǎotāi (to make known one's position)

tuōchǎn (to leave one's normal job for further training)

guīkǒu (channel to the proper authorities on the basis of jurisdiction)

Subordinative Compound (S-C)

xiàfàng (transfer to a lower level)

shàngfǎng (to go to a higher level to appeal for help)

mángliú (to wander around blindly)

Coordinative Compound (C-C)

tuìpéi (to return what one has unlawfully taken or pay compensation for it)

lǎo dà nán (long standing, big, and difficult)

duō kuài hǎo shěng (more, faster, better, and more economical)

Subject-predicate (S-P)

kēpǔ (popularization of science)

tǔ yáng bìng yòng (use both indigenous and foreign or traditional and modern methods)

guánguó yìpán qí (the whole nation is like a game of chess - to coordinate all the activities of the nation like pieces in a chess game, to take the whole nation into account.

Verb-complement (V-C)

zhuājǐn (to grasp tightly- to pay close attention to)

luòshí (workable, make sure, carry out)

The problem caused by this group would be the newness of the items. The most up-to-date dictionary may not have some of them. In order to learn those which cannot be found in a dictionary, one has to ask a native speaker for help. It is anyway a good idea to get together with a native speaker as much as possible not just for the explanation on neologisms of course. There are many other things one can learn from a native speaker.

For a list of neologisms please see Eugene Ching, "From 'Lover' to 'Spouse': a Glossary of Neologisms of the PRC," Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association, February, 1982.

Chinese Characters

毛主席和他的爱人杨开慧

紧张
旅馆紧张
火車紧张
现在火車很紧张
现在旅馆紧张不容易定到房间
外办 - 外事办公室
中直 - 中央直属机关
三转一响
五讲四美三热爱

讲文明	心灵美	热爱祖国
讲道德	语言美	热爱人民
讲卫生	行为美	热爱社会主义
讲秩序	环境美	
讲礼貌		

练兵
会战
端正思想
社会主义地建设新中国　　社会主义的目标
英雄地抵抗美帝　　英雄的氣概
天才地领导中国革命　　天才的氣质
建设生产的重庆
重庆生产的自行車　　生产自行車的重庆
完成　完得成完不成　完成得了完成不了
对象　对了象了
作用　起带头作用
外界的事物作用于人们的感觉四官，在人们的头腦里形成印象.

天南海北
氣管炎
妻管嚴
穿小鞋
戴帽子
修脚的　脚夫夫
赤脚医生
七十元
海外关係
一套房子
二老双亡
三转一叮响
四季衣裳
五官端正
六親不认
七十元
八面玲珑
九(酒)不沾
十分听话
海陆空
海外关係
落(陆)实政策
空房子
新生事物
旧瓶新酒
表態
脫産
归口

下放
上访
首流
退賠
老大难
多快好省
科普
土洋并用
全国一盤棋
抓緊
落实